

The Academic Lecture: Learn to Listen or Listen to Learn?

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Abstract

It appears that English Second Language (ESL) students experience much difficulty with comprehending and recalling information from content lectures. It further seems that in general very little attention is given to the development of listening skills in courses such as English second language, English for Specific Purposes and English for Academic Purposes. Informal discussions with lecturers in other disciplines further indicated that this problem is not confined to English for Academic Purposes courses, as many students seem to find it difficult to comprehend the information presented in content lectures. This article will discuss listening comprehension as a construct and will explore the process of listening to academic lectures. It will further focus on English second language students' listening comprehension in academic lectures at the hand of a study conducted with first year students at the University of Namibia. Finally it will recommend possible ways by which tertiary students could be assisted in becoming active listeners.

Although English second Language (ESL) students may fulfill the requirements in English to be accepted at tertiary institutions, they usually find the transition from school learning to independent learning at tertiary level difficult. Apart from other constraining issues, their ability to function in an English environment seems to be the most inhibiting factor to academic success (Carrier 1999; Chaudron and Richards 1986; Vandergriff 2004). In a lecture situation, listening seems to be an isolated skill, not interacting with other language skills. Students frequently experience difficulty listening and comprehending in their own languages. It can therefore be expected that they will experience even more difficulty in listening to a second language. Despite the recognition that academic listening skills are essential for academic success, relatively little research has been done in ESL listening (Flowerdew 1994:7).

The lecture genre itself, furthermore, brings its own particular and potential areas of difficulty. Benson (1994:189) describes successful listening to lectures as being able to "concentrate on and understand long stretches of talk without the opportunity of engaging in the facilitating functions of interactive discourse such as asking for repetitions and negotiating of meaning." Listening to academic lectures could be defined as a problem-solving skill, in which the student plays an active and crucial role in determining not only the subject of the spoken text from the introductory words of the lecturer, but also in making correct predictions of the possible development of the spoken text. Academic listening is more than the correct matching of sounds and words, as it also involves deriving meaning from meaning-bearing words, such as conjunctions and discourse markers. Therefore, it can justifiably be assumed that, if academic success is to be achieved, ESL students at university will need all available strategies to assist them in assimilating the information presented in oral lectures in their respective fields of study as effectively as possible. Research (Chaudron and Richards 1986) has shown that the introduction of appropriate discourse markers will assist the lecturer in ensuring that his/her intended meaning is conveyed, as there is usually not much room provided for the negotiation of meaning in the lecture situation.

Models and Theories

Dunkel (1991:435) points out that current theories of second language acquisition (SLA) emphasise the key role that listening plays and that model building “forms the foundation of theory development and should be vigorously pursued ... if we are to advance the knowledge base about the process of listening comprehension in general and second language (L2) listening comprehension in particular” (1991:446).

Some models of listening comprehension are:

- The Intake Model (Chaudron and Richards, 1986). According to this model, the human brain takes in information, stores and locates it. It further organises information and facilitates operations and decisions and generates responses to the information (Lerner, 1997). Even if input is understood by the listener, it may not be processed by the learner’s internal mechanisms. Comprehensible input is thus not a sufficient condition for learning. Only when input becomes intake, can learning take place (Ellis 1985:159). It can thus be assumed that the effective use of discourse markers, which help to structure the spoken academic lecture would enable students to follow the macro-organisation of the lecture and may assist them in receiving content information as comprehensible input to be processed as intake, available for recall in examination situations.
- The Monitor Model or Input Hypothesis (Krashen 1985). This model states that an important condition for language acquisition to occur is that the listener/reader understands (via hearing/reading) input language that contains structures which are *just a bit beyond* his or her current level of competence. As the content information conveyed by the spoken lecture relies on the students’ schemata and is also supposed to instruct them, it is assumed that they would be assisted in their comprehension processes if discourse markers indicated the internal coherence of the lecture.
- Tyler and Warren (1987 in Tsui and Fullilove 1998:435) have also found that comprehension takes place when a listener can successfully decode incoming input and integrate the new information into an existing knowledge system. Voss (1984 in Jensen and Hansen 1995:102) further shows that for successful speech perception, the listener has *to check* linguistic and acoustic information in the text against the semantic information to either confirm or reject the hypothesis. Buck (1991 in Tsui and Fullilove 1998:435) feels that listeners should check and monitor their developing interpretation “in the light of linguistic input and their background knowledge” to ensure that the interpretation is a reasonable one. Discourse markers employed in the spoken texts may thus become key pegs onto which students can hang information, in order to check this information against their existing schemata, as well as against the linguistic features of the text.

Although listening comprehension of the academic lecture, where little room for negotiating of meaning exists, is much more complex than listening comprehension in a social context, many of the above-mentioned can be recognised in the academic listening situation. Therefore, in the process of selectively listening to utterances, discourse markers may be able to assist the listener in selecting the most probable interpretation of the possible pragmatic meaning of the utterance; thus, the hierarchical representation that is stored in the long-term memory should be more

directly in line with the original structure of the lecture text. The author therefore believes that students will be able to recall more exactly what the lecturer conveys in the lecture, should they be conversant in the roles that discourse markers play in the spoken academic lecture.

The context of the research problem

In order to address some of the difficulties incoming ESL students experience, a Language Centre was established at the University of Namibia (UNAM) to meet the needs of these students. At the moment much time is devoted to developing the students' academic reading and writing skills and some attention is given to presentation skills. Listening comprehension skills, however, are largely neglected as listening is still regarded to a great extent as "a passive skill meriting little classroom attention" (Vandergriff 2004:3). A fairly large number of lecturers also still assume that "if a student can hear, s/he can also listen."

Increasing involvement with ESL students has, however, indicated that much of their inability to comprehend spoken lectures and correctly recall content information may be because they only listen to the words and concentrate on understanding the grammar of the language used, rather than focusing on the message conveyed by the speaker. In so doing, they miss important semantic cues which could enable them to synthesise the content of the lecture. A possible reason for this may be that they are not made sufficiently aware of the listening process or of the fact that they can regard an academic lecture very much in the same way as a chapter in a textbook – a more or less complete unit of instruction but delivered orally by the lecturer.

Another aspect of students' listening comprehension difficulties is that they are exposed to a variety of lecturers with different English accents and pronunciation features. Most of the instruction students receive is presented in face-to-face contexts and the classes are heterogeneous in terms of social class, culture and ethnic background. Many of the lecturers are not English first language (L1) speakers themselves. Heavy demands are thus made on students' ability to comprehend accented English. These difficulties could also contribute to the fact that students seem to concentrate mainly on the lexico-grammatical features of the spoken text, instead of listening for meaning.

Furthermore, when students enter university, they are expected to be able to take responsibility for their own learning. This implies not only studying existing material, but also creating their own sources of information such as reliable notes taken during lectures. As much of the subject information that students receive at university is provided in the form of lectures, it is essential that they are able to relate to it as a source of cognitive input. In order to derive maximum intake from the lecture, they should be able to perceive not only its overall structure but also recognise when direction is changed and new aspects are introduced. The structure of the lecture as well as transition stages are often indicated through the use of discourse markers such as "*Let us look at the following*" These devices work at a discourse level and are not dependent on the smaller units of talk (sentences) of which discourse is composed (Schiffrin 1988).

Major research questions and hypotheses

In this study, the central question posed was whether students would improve their listening comprehension if they were made aware of the role of discourse markers in authentic lectures. A subsequent question was whether such awareness-raising would benefit students when answering gap-filling questions, multiple-choice questions and inference questions posed on the content information in a spoken lecture.

A general hypothesis was formulated, namely that an intervention programme on the role of discourse markers will significantly improve students' listening comprehension. It was further tested whether an intervention programme on the role of discourse markers would significantly improve students' scores in gap-filling questions, multiple-choice questions and inference questions.

Methodology and research design

A quantitative study was conducted to determine whether the students would gain a practical skill which they could employ to enhance their listening comprehension in academic lectures. The test performances of two groups of students studying at UNAM were compared. One group had been introduced to a particular construct in an intervention programme and the other group had not. An intervention programme to raise students' awareness of the role of discourse markers in the structuring of academic lectures was designed. To test the efficacy of such a programme, a pre-test – intervention – post-test design was employed. The test consisted of three sections, namely seven gap-filling questions, ten multiple-choice questions and three inference questions. As test instrument for this study a video-taped lecture was initially shown to all the participants, including those in the control group. The data collected were analysed and statistically processed.

The existing listening comprehension competence of both the experimental and control groups was thus tested before any awareness-raising by means of the intervention programme was instituted. After an eight-week intervention programme in which the experimental group was made aware of discourse markers and their role in structuring academic lectures, both groups' performance was again tested by means of the post-test. There was thus a ten-week lag between the pre- and post-tests. The control group of students was not exposed to the intervention programme and they only attended the regular lectures in the English for Academic Purposes (UCA) course.

For the intervention programme the course material of the UCA course was used. Eight different lectures were compiled and pre-recorded. In each lecture a large number of discourse markers were used in order to raise students' awareness of the benefits discourse markers can offer in the listening process. Each lecture was preceded by an explanation of the discourse markers used in the specific lecture. At the end of each lecture a task was given to assess the student's comprehension and retention of the lecture text. These pre-recordings were played to students in a language laboratory where they each listened to the lecture on a set of earphones. The discourse markers incorporated in the pre-test/post-test were also among those presented and explained in the recorded lectures.

A questionnaire was also completed by all the participants to collect important background information from the participants to assess their previous contact with English as a language of communication and instruction. Descriptive analysis was employed to measure some of the questionnaire items. The biographical details collected added a socio-linguistic dimension to the study, as they presented information on the level of proficiency and the quality of English the students had acquired before entering university. As it was deemed necessary to determine whether the students' listening skills were sophisticated enough to derive content information from academic lectures, the data from the questionnaire helped to form a holistic picture of the working English the participants in the study had brought to university.

Sampling of participants

First year students at the UNAM participated in this study. These students were mainly ESL speakers and although they had fulfilled the English language proficiency requirements of the university, in general they found listening comprehension in an academic English environment difficult.

As the total UCA population at the Language Centre consisted of approximately five hundred students at the time of the study, the experimental and control groups of twenty-seven students each represented ten percent of that population. The majority of the students in both groups were B Juris students, although in each group five students were from other disciplines. The students who participated in the study all indicated that they had studied English as a subject before coming to university.

Most of the participants in the study came from urban areas; however, a number of them were from the rural areas and a few were foreigners. These students usually have fairly well-developed basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) but their cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) is usually not adequate for tertiary studies through the medium of English (Cummins 1980).

Findings

Students who were supported by means of the intervention programme appeared to have fared much better in the post-test than those students who were left to their own devices. The former group had more success in selecting and interpreting information from auditory cues in order to determine what the speaker meant. These students furthermore appeared to have made better use of the short processing time available in the listening process because they had made greater use of semantic cohesive devices such as discourse markers in the monologic, complex lecture text.

Table 5.1: Independent samples test for post-test/pre-test improvement

	Equality of Variances		means t-test for Equality of			
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff
Pre-test	0.009	0.926	0.351	52	0.727	1.48
Post-test	0.106	0.747	4.137	52	0.000*	21.11
	0.008	0.931	6.461	52	0.000*	19.6296

At the pre-test level the experimental and control groups did not differ significantly as the independent samples t-test indicated $t = 0.351$ ($p = 0.747$; thus $p > 0.05$). At the post-test level, however, the experimental and control groups differed significantly as the independent samples t-test indicated $t = 4.137$ ($p = 0.000$, thus $p < 0.05$). The improvement in the post-test showed $t = 0.931$ ($p < 0.001$). Because the groups did not differ significantly at the pre-test level, it seemed unlikely that the improvement of the experimental group was by chance and it could thus be derived that the awareness-raising of the role of discourse markers was largely responsible for the significant improvement of the experimental group's listening comprehension as measured by the pre-test/post-test design of this study.

5.2. Findings in the gap-filling section of the pre-/post-tests

According to Rost (1994:124), gap-filling questions can be regarded as "closed tasks" of "fixed difficulty" in contrast to multiple-choice questions where alternative possible answers are provided. The results obtained from calculating the students' scores in this section could therefore be regarded as reliable.

At the pre-test level the group mean of 34.44 for the experimental group in this test section was slightly greater than the 32.96 of the control group but both groups scored low in this section of the pre-test.

Table 5.3: Independent samples test for the gap-filling questions section in the pre-test

	t-test	t-test for Equality of means
	df	Sig. (Sig. (2-tailed))
Gap-filling questions: pre-test	52	0.755*

The independent samples test for the gap-filling questions in the first section of the pre-test was $t = 0.314$ ($p = 0.755$; thus $p > 0.05$), indicating that no significant difference existed at this level. When the results of the post-test were analysed, a different picture however emerged.

The group means in the post-test revealed a more than 20% difference between the scores of the two groups in the gap-filling questions section.

Table 5.5: Independent samples test for the gap-filling questions section in the post-test

	t-test for Equality of means
	df Sig. (2-tailed)
Gap-filling questions: post-test	52 0.000*

The independent samples test scores were 4.125 ($p = 0.001$). There was therefore a highly significant difference in the results of the experimental and control groups in this section of the post-test.

When the test answers were considered individually, the following observations were made. Only one of the participants in the experimental group scored two marks less in this section of the post-test than in the pre-test. This did not have a significant influence on the test scores as all the other participants improved on their initial results. In the intervention programme students were made aware that discourse markers often indicated that important, notable information would follow; it appears that the students were able to recognise exact words and phrases used in the lecture while they were attending to the video recording. According to Ur (1997), people remember individual words better if they can link items together in sense units. Discourse markers often define such sense units. The students in the experimental group appeared to be aided by their ability to recognise and interpret the discourse markers used in the lecture and link items together, subsequently remembering individual words better.

The results for the control group, on the other hand, indicated a less homogenous performance as only six of the participants improved on their pre-test scores in the post-test and eleven of them attained the same scores as in the pre-test. Nine participants scored less in this section of the post-test than they had in the pre-test. According to Field (2004), second language (L2) listeners tend to construct a schema relating to the topic of a listening text and use this to guide their processing of incomplete bottom-up information. These students appeared to have altered their version of what they had heard to fit it to preconceived ideas of what the text should cover. The students attending the intervention programme, however, appeared to be alerted to relevant content information and were also able to match individual words to known words which were supported by top-down evidence.

As the gap-filling questions section of the test was designed to test the students' auditory recognition of specific words that were used in the lecture, these were directly related to the use of specific discourse markers. This study attempted to show that listening comprehension problems of L2 students should not be attributed only to lack of knowledge of vocabulary but that an incapability to interpret discourse markers played a big role in their comprehension of oral input.

Findings in the multiple-choice question section of the pre/post tests

The second section of the test comprised seven multiple-choice questions. The rationale for using multiple-choice questions was that they indicated understanding of a text as they identified propositions in the text. They can further be regarded as "selected probes of text representation which eliminate disturbing and prejudicial material from the items" (Rost 1994:33).

In this test section of the pre-test the means for the experimental and control groups were 54.52 and 51.89 respectively. These results indicated that at the beginning of the experiment the experimental group achieved a slightly higher average score than the control group. However, the difference between the two groups was not significant. It should be noted that both groups attained mean scores of more than 50% in this section of the pre-test.

Table 5.7: Independent samples test for the multiple-choice questions section of the pre-test.

		t-test for Equality of means
	Tttt	t Sig. (2-tailed)
Multiple-choice questions: pre-test	0.36 0.368	0.715

$p > 0.05$

The independent samples test for this section of the pre-test showed $t = 0.368$ ($p = 0.715$; thus $p > 0.05$) indicating that the two groups' marks did not differ significantly at the pre-test level. However, when the results in the post-test were analysed, they differed significantly from those in the pre-test.

Although the initial scores for both groups in the multiple-choice section of the pre-test were quite high, the experimental group showed an increase in the post-test of 11.55% in their mean scores and the control group only 0.04%. As the intervention programme constituted the only difference in the tutoring of these two groups and the answers of the multiple-choice questions were all introduced by means of discourse markers, it seemed clear that the experimental group's awareness of the role of discourse markers did assist them in deriving content information from the lecture.

Table 5.9: Independent samples test for the multiple-choice questions section in the post-test

		t-test for Equality of means
	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Multiple-choice questions: post-test	52	0.067

* $p < 0.05$

The independent samples test furthermore showed $t = 1.874$ ($p = 0.067 < 0.05$); thus clearly indicating a significant difference between the scores of the experimental and control groups at the post-test level.

The difference in the means of the two groups in the multiple-choice section of the post-test was 14.14. This showed that the experimental group convincingly outperformed the control group in the post-test, a test domain that was cognitively fairly undemanding, as possible answers to the questions were provided and students also had the opportunity to guess what the possible answers might be. Furthermore, their performance provided some evidence of selection of strategies during listening. The weaker performance of the control group indicated that they had made inferences based on links between unmatched items from the text and, as a result, had not formed an acceptable representation of the relevant part of the listening task (Rost 1994).

When the test scores of the two groups were studied separately, the individual scores of the participants in the two groups reflected completely different profiles. Twenty of the students in the experimental group improved their initial scores. Only four scored less in the post-test than in the pre-test. These latter students had also achieved fairly low marks in the pre-test and could be regarded as below-average students in general. Thus their weak performance might have been due to existing habits of guessing when answering multiple-choice questions. Three participants achieved the same scores as in the pre-test. On the whole, the test-takers in the experimental group showed a healthy progress in their proficiency in answering multiple-choice questions which tested the content of the lecture. In many content subjects multiple-choice questions seem to be a favourite test item.

The analysis of the post-test scores of the individual students in the control group reflected that they had answered the questions in an unstructured way as they gave wrong answers to questions which they had answered correctly in the pre-test. Eight of them improved their test results in this section, while eight scored lower marks in the post-test than in the pre-test. These students were also low achievers in the pre-test. Eleven students attained the same score as in the pre-test. It again indicated their lack of awareness of any structuring of the lecture text as reflected in the chronological order of the questions asked in the test. This most probably contributed to their inability/unpreparedness to persevere in carrying forward representations of the text even if their understanding was flawed or incomplete (Rost 1994). An awareness of discourse markers and the role they play in giving structure to an otherwise uninterrupted non-collaborative stream of discourse could have assisted them in making meaning.

Findings in the inference questions section

The questions in this section of the tests were designed to test the students' ability to draw conclusions from the information they had received when attending the lecture. These questions were thus not related to the use of specific discourse markers in the lecture text.

Initially, the means of the test scores achieved by both groups in the third section of the pre-test, comprising three inference questions, indicated some difference between the experimental and the control group. The means of the experimental and control groups were 34.52 and 25.81 respectively. As the ability to make

inferences when attending to academic texts is regarded as an important skill in tertiary learning, the author was concerned about the low average scores of the participants in this section of the pre-test and was thus particularly interested to establish whether the intervention programme would improve the students' abilities to make inferences or not.

Table 5.11: Independent samples test for the inference questions section of the pre-test.

	t-test for Equality of means		
	TTtt	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Inference: post-test	1.15	1.156	0.253

$p > 0.05$

In the section containing inference questions the independent samples test showed $t = 1.156$ ($p = 0.253$; thus $p > 0.05$), indicating that the two groups' low scores did not differ significantly at the pre-test level.

When the mean scores in this section of the post-test for the two groups were compared, a significant difference was revealed. The mean scores of the results in the inference questions section of the post-test indicated a difference of 33.34 between the two groups in the post-test, compared to a difference of 8.71 in the pre-test.

Table 5.13: Independent samples test for the inference questions section in the post-test

	t-test for Equality of means		
	dff	df	Sig. (2-tailed)

Inference questions: post-test	52	52	0.000*
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* $p \leq 0.001$

For the inference question section of the post-test the independent samples test further showed that $t = 4.373$ ($p = 0.000$; thus $p \leq 0.001$), indicating that the scores for the two groups differed very significantly at the post-test level.

There was no significant improvement in the scores of the control group of participants. It, therefore, appeared as if no natural development of their listening comprehension skills had occurred. They showed regression rather than progress in their ability to listen critically to the lecture. According to Rost (1994), non-understanding in listening refers to the conflict between the type of inferences that the speaker expects the listener to draw from the speaker's utterances and those that the hearer actually draws. A perfect match between the speaker's intended message and the listener's received information cannot ever be made. Discourse markers however do seem to pave the way to a better match between speaker and listener as "understanding spoken language is essentially an inferential process based on a perception of cues rather than the straightforward matching of sounds" (Rost 1990:33).

When the scores were scrutinised individually, they revealed that seven participants in the experimental group failed to answer any of the questions in this section of the pre-test correctly. In the post-test only one of the participants failed to answer the questions correctly. Three of the participants further scored lower marks in the post-test than they had in the pre-test. These three students achieved low test scores in the pre-test as well. It might have been that they still found it difficult to use available information to form hypotheses by attending to input or by filling in missing information, despite attending the intervention programme.

However, eighteen of the participants in the experimental group improved their scores on this section of the post-test. It seemed that the intervention programme did benefit most of them. Their newly acquired awareness of the role discourse markers play in structuring spoken text seemed to have enabled them to pay closer attention to what was relevant in the text and thus derive more factual information from the lecture. They appeared to be able to discriminate between what was important and what was less important. By employing these cognitive tactics, they were more successful in constructing the big picture in terms of local cohesion (within the text) and global cohesion (with information outside the text) (Goh 2002).

The picture for the control group of participants, however, looked very different. Twelve of them failed to answer any of the questions correctly in the pre-test as well as in the post-test. Three of the students who originally failed to answer any question correctly did, however, each answer one question correctly in the post-test. Another eight of the participants scored lower in the post-test in this section than they had in the pre-test. It should be noted that three of the students who scored

less in this section of the test were foreign students and another two were from rural areas. Due to a possible low CALP (Cummins), these students might not have known how to draw inferences from academic texts. An intervention programme in listening comprehension could have benefited them even more than those students who were more proficient in English at the beginning of the experiment.

Only six of the students in the control group managed to improve their scores in this section of the post-test. The overall results of this group thus indicated that they failed to apply a logical system of analysis and synthesis when listening to lectures. It appeared as if they still perceived the lecture as a stream of talk but failed to listen for content information from which they could derive meaning.

The author was struck by the lack of consistency in the control group's test performances. The ability to draw inferences in academic texts is generally regarded as a major contributor to success in studies at tertiary level; it does, however, pre-suppose the ability to distinguish between lower order and higher order comprehension. The latter relates to drawing inferences and critical evaluation. It was thus disheartening to see that these students were obviously lost in what they probably perceived as a non-collaborative monologue (Rost 1994). It might also have been that they were more concerned with absorbing information per se than with the speaker's intentions and goals.

If exposure to the lecture situation in the tertiary environment was sufficient to develop students' listening comprehension, a degree of improvement could have been expected in the post-test scores of the students in the control group. However, their post-test scores indicated stagnation rather than natural growth and progress in their academic listening comprehension abilities.

It thus seems imperative that students should be supported by means of intervention programmes in lecture listening and that the awareness-raising of the role discourse markers play in structuring oral text should not be underestimated. The participants in the experimental group who were made aware of the role of discourse markers were able to gain a clearer perspective of the lecture as a whole and could arrive at informed interpretations of what had been said.

Summary of major findings

It was clear from information provided in the questionnaire which formed part of the study that students' low success rate at UNAM could not be attributed solely to their disadvantaged educational past, as most of the students who took part in this experiment came from urban areas where teaching is assumed to be better resourced. The students further seemed to know English well in its written form as they appeared to be proficient in reading and writing English texts. This knowledge, however, did not seem to assist them in the listening process since the auditory recognition skills involved in listening decoding are clearly different from the visual recognition skills required for reading (Rost 1994). The low scores in the pre-test initially came as a surprise as it was expected that the students from urban areas should be proficient listeners. It was clear that students could not rely only on their general proficiency in English to derive content information in the lecture. They needed the ability to access those mechanisms which made the spoken lecture an interpretable unit of talk.

The findings in this study seemed to correspond with those of Khuwaleih (1999). She found that students' failure was due to a lack of understanding academic lectures rather than to an inability to comprehend the subject content conveyed in the lectures. The agreement across the three different measures of comprehension of participants seem to realise the general hypothesis in this study that students comprehend a lecture better when they are aware of discourse markers and the role they play in structuring lecture text.

The positive effect of the intervention programme is clearly demonstrated by the experimental group of students' significant improvement in all three sections of the test. The most significant improvement was in section three which dealt with inference questions. It appeared that the students had become aware of the content of the lecture and made successful use of this knowledge to facilitate recall of content information. Their interpretation of the content and their subsequently improved performance in the inference questions indicated an awareness of the fact that a spoken text is a semantic unit relating as a whole to the environment in which it is placed.

The importance of listening cannot be underestimated and it should not be treated trivially in L2 and foreign language curricula. It should also not receive cavalier treatment from second language acquisition (SLA) researchers but listening research should be fostered to advance the state of SLA theory building and to expand knowledge about the process of L2 listening comprehension.

The implications of the findings

The findings in this study on the role discourse markers play in academic lectures correspond with those of Chaudron and Richards (1986), who found that discourse markers, especially macro-markers which are the highest order markers, signalling major transitions and emphasis in a spoken academic lecture, were conducive to successful recall. The outcomes of this study thus suggest that students entering a tertiary institution could benefit from language training programmes. Those students who attended the intervention programme showed significant improvement on the post-test. It seemed clear that the participants in the intervention programme had learned how to listen, instead of just listened to learn (Vandergrieff 2005).

The intervention programme in this study focused on training the students to notice when and how lecturers use discourse markers or "verbal signposting" (King 1994:223) in their lecture texts. When the scores of the experimental group of students in the multiple-choice questions section of the post-test were compared to those in the pre-test, it was clear that they were much better equipped to extract factual information from the text than before the intervention programme. The findings in this study thus correspond with those of Chaudron and Richards (1986) and Flowerdew and Tauroza (1995), namely that there was a consistent result that macro-markers were conducive to recall of subject content in academic lectures.

Recommendations

The relatively low profile of listening assessment at tertiary institutions reflects the inherent difficulties involved in describing and assessing an "invisible cognitive operation" (Brindley 1998: 171). It is also difficult to distinguish between the lower order of comprehension which relates to the understanding of utterances at a literal

level and the higher order of understanding which relates to drawing inferences and critical evaluation.

According to Field (1998), spending time on helping students tackle their listening problems is an important part of teaching listening. It is therefore crucial that course designers include practice activities in their course design to help students overcome or cope with listening comprehension difficulties. Students may then have better control over their listening comprehension. The outcome of this study clearly shows the benefits of an awareness-raising programme and accompanying practice activities.

However, in dealing with students' listening comprehension difficulties, much depends on the specific programme and how it is run (Cohen 1998) and sustained. Furthermore, an ongoing evaluation and revision of the programme is necessary to ensure its success. Students also need to be involved in their own learning processes to create an awareness of what is needed to become successful, independent learners at tertiary level. When the students exposed to the intervention programme were confronted with their low scores in the first audio-taped lecture, they realised for the first time that their listening skills were not adequate in deriving content information from spoken text. Their motivation to improve their listening competence was proved by their involvement and cooperation in the rest of the programme.

Contributions to SLA theory and research

It is naïve for a researcher to remain fixated on the politically tainted cliché that the low academic success of post-colonial black students in Namibia and South Africa can be directly linked to an academically disadvantaged past. Although this aspect cannot be rejected, the low rate of academic success at tertiary level should be seen holistically as comprising several aspects such as linguistic, socio-cultural, meta-cognitive and cognitive factors. A need to establish Language Centres at universities, not only in Namibia but also in South Africa, as service centres for both the student and lecturer population has been identified. This is an indication that students, no matter what their ethnic origin or background, need to be supported in acquiring skills and strategies which will enable them to become successful scholars.

The qualitative information derived from the questionnaire in this study further showed that, although these university students were aware that the level of competence in English they had brought to university might not be adequate for academic studies, they themselves did not see it as an insurmountable obstacle to their academic progress. They did, however, realise the importance of academic proficiency in English as a foundation for effective tertiary studies. It would thus be productive if a paradigm shift in listening instruction courses could be effected towards lecture-listening instruction. Listening as a construct, as well as the demands made on the listener in lecture listening, needs specific attention in English language curricula. To ensure that school leavers, intending to pursue tertiary studies, are able to derive optimum cognitive benefits from academic lectures, they should be supported already at school level by means of awareness-raising programmes to enhance their listening comprehension when they enter university. Listening comprehension research, furthermore, needs to be focused on possible supporting programmes that will allow students to become selective, effective and active listeners in academic situations.

Academic staff also need to move away from assumptions that “because students can hear, they can listen” and that the main problem for students lies in the difficult content conveyed in lectures. A lecture topic that was unfamiliar to the students was used in this study. The pre- and post-tests were conducted with both the experimental and control groups. The fact that only the experimental group showed improvement at the end of the experiment can thus not be ascribed to students’ familiarity with the topic or their natural ability to hear.

An awareness of the role of markers in structuring academic discourse could equip listeners to become actively involved in listening and recalling information in test and examination situations. Khuwaleih (1999) has found that “chunking” or discourse markers such as “*Finally ...*” and “*On the other hand ...*” were of great importance to students. Her study indicated that when taking notes, the students started another set of notes each time the lecturers used a chunk. “We found that chunks, phrases and body language play a crucial role on students’ comprehension of academic lectures” (1999:259).

Conclusion

Every year a large number of non-native English speakers enter the University of Namibia, an English medium institution of higher learning. Much more research on the effects of an awareness of discourse markers and the role they play in structuring spoken academic texts is needed, as much of the existing research is associated with Western culture. Namibia belongs to a different culture which varies in its classroom discourse and preferences; thus constituting a different set of variables than that which would be encountered in a First World academic environment. The teacher-centred approach, relying much on rote-learning of the subject content, is still prevalent in a large number of local schools (Wolfaardt 2001). Therefore, if school leavers are expected to be independent learners at university and to infer meanings, they need to be supported in becoming critical listeners. Should they be able to determine the global structure of a lecture and critically interpret the direction a lecturer takes, they will learn to infer meaning and interpret the text rather than just receive and accept unquestioningly what lecturers say.

It remains a fact, however, that no amount of meticulous planning, careful delivery or explicit signalling can guarantee the comprehension of an academic lecture. This study should thus be seen as contributing to the description of some of the complexities of listening comprehension as a construct. In the light and nature of the outcome of this study and as an indication of avenues for further research, it would, therefore, be useful to speculate further on the role of discourse markers in the listening process

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